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ABSTRACT

The author examines the peculiarly crucial role played by spoken communication in the development and advancement of Indian cultures, with special attention to the challenges and contrasts the American Indian student presents for the speech communication educator. Three specific aspects of traditional speech communication behavior, unique to the American Indian, are discussed. These three--the tradition of Indian eloquence, comparatively superior listening and memory capacities, and silence as an integral part of communication--are suggested for consideration by the speech communication teacher whose classroom includes American Indian students. (LG)

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SPEECH COMMUNICATION EDUCATION AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN: CHALLENGES AND CONTRASTS

Lynn R. Osborn*

> And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.
>
> Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.[1]

These eloquent phrases fell not from the lips of a Greco-Roman orator or an Oxford debater, but rather they were articulated by one whose people historically were vilified and scorned as being ignorant, noncommunicative, pagan savages. Thus spoke Seattle, Chief of the Suquamish and Duwamish tribes, for whom the largest city in the Evergreen State of Washington now is named.

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And, as we as Speech Communication educators address ourselves to the challenges and contrasts presented by American Indian students in our classes, it must be with enlightened awareness and an expanded appreciation of the peculiarly crucial role played by spoken communication in the development and advancement of Indian cultures. In this era of the "communication explosion," the electronic mass media, and sophisticated information retrieval systems; we must attempt to understand contemporary societies whose histories, religious practices, social mores, and traditions for thousands of years were recorded only in the human memory and transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. This paper is a partial attempt in that direction.

Though shrouded in the mists of centuries of general apathy, racial prejudice, and scholarly disregard; the excellence in communication revealed by such Indian spokesmen as Seattle, Red Jacket, and Ten Bears and their present-day counterparts in the persons of Vine Deloria, Jr., Scott Momaday, and Clyde Warrior (deceased)...to name but a few...cries out for our recognition!

Of equal importance in any effort to compare or contrast the communicative behavior of Indian and non-Indian students is an understanding of the listening capabilities and training of the former's ancestors. As Grinnell observed in commenting upon this subject:

> ...memorable events are retained only in the minds of the people, and are handed down by the elders to their children and by these again

transmitted to their children, so passing from generation to generation. Until recent years, one of the sacred duties of certain elders of the tribes was the handing down of these histories to their successors. As they repeated them, they impressed upon the hearer the importance of remembering the stories precisely as told, and of telling them again exactly as he had received them, neither adding nor taking away anything. Thus, early taught his duty, each listener strove to perform it, and to impress on those whom he in turn instructed a similar obligation.[2]

Lacking, for the most part, viable written languages, such precision of listening and accuracy in retention and retelling were not simply idealistic goals for the Indian but pragmatic imperatives to his very survival! Thus, it was a matter of the utmost concern that these qualities be stressed to the extent of demanding perfection in their acquisition and exercise. This concern, though certainly diminished in recent years, still remains today among those tribes striving to retain the languages and oral traditions of their past.

Spencer, for example, found in his studies during the late 1950's:

> The idea was "to get the story right." If a raconteur deviated by as much as a word in his recital, his skill was considered dubious indeed....The sense of personal integrity is so strong that unless a man feels he can be accurate, he prefers to keep silent.[3]

In addition to the qualities of excellence in verbal expression and listening already noted, a third aspect of traditional speech communication

behavior should be considered by the teacher of American Indian students... that of the role of silence. As Shirley Witt, the Iroquois anthropologist, has stated it so well:

> For speech to have full meaning, it must also have silence. Silence is half of speech; speech is half of silence. It is not pause. Neither is it an interlude of anxiety glowing red and viscous. It is not a time of frantic groping for thoughts and words to express thoughts. Least of all is silence the brackets surrounding communication. Silence is the continuity which integrates ideas and words. And it is more. Silence is a thing of power. Beyond any utterance, the power of silence stands vast and awesome.[4]

The restrictions of time in the presentation of this paper do not permit treatment of all the various factors which help to shape the communication personality which the Indian student brings with him to our classrooms. Therefore, the three just mentioned...the tradition of Indian eloquence, exceptional listening and memory capacities, and a unique appreciation of the relative importance of silence...will be elaborated upon in those moments remaining.

Perhaps one of the most glaring myths regarding the American Indian which have been perpetuated in his historical treatment by the non-Indian is that of the "Silent Red Man." Portrayal of the Indian in both the print and electronic media over the years has reinforced the stereotyped image of a stoic, expressionless individual limited in vocabulary to a few grunts, an occasional "ugh," a "how" greeting now and then, and the classic

"U-h-h-h, Kemo Sabe" uttered by Tonto. The fact of the matter is, Native American speakers excelled in the art of oratorical eloquence!

The Indian student comes to us with a profound philosophy and rich heritage of spoken communication for which we (and often the student himself) have little or no appreciation! These have been set forth by one contemporary Indian scholar in this manner:

> The spoken word contains a life all its own, an endless life. The spoken word does not fall to the ground, shatter, and turn to dust, in Indian comprehension. The spoken word is born, takes flight, and lives forever - always ready to be recalled if need be. And when words have the value of immortality, one is careful not to use them haphazardly or falsely....In the great reluctance of Indian people to interrupt when another person is speaking one sees this respect for words....The mark of a traditionalist in speaking is his extreme care in the choice of words he uses....Perhaps no other group in North America comes anywhere near the ratios of speeches per capita and speakers per capita as are produced from the ranks of the Indian people.[5]

The Pulitzer-Prize-winning Kiowa author, N. Scott Momaday, briefly summarized this concept when he wrote:

> A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred.[6]

Recognizing this inherent power and value of "words," a great deal of

emphasis was placed upon the development of skill and facility in their use in the tribal societies. One study, examining this development in considerable depth is that of Balgooyen.[7] In his findings, the author commented at length upon the training and preparation of the Plains Indian as a responsible communicator. Regarding this matter, at one point Balgooyen observed:

> ...it was natural that the Indians should spend some time and effort in training young men in the art of speaking. Young men were advised in such matters by older and more experienced relatives, but neophites /sic/ received most of their basic training in speech by imitating their elders....For the most part, however, the writer was not able to discover any evidence of formal training in speaking, nor were there any special tests of excellence applied. Skill in this respect was accepted with the belief that such powers were given to man by supernatural forces.[8]

Before moving on, it seems appropriate to call attention to the excellent coverage given by Balgooyen to the several speaking roles of tribal leaders, first in his doctoral dissertation entitled The Public Speaking of the Typical North American Plains Indians of the Nineteenth Century[9] and in a subsequent adaptation appearing in the volume, Landmarks In Western Oratory.[10]

Turning now to the superior development of listening and memory skills evidenced by those Indians of the "pre-English-literacy" era of their history when compared to non-Indian peers, there is yet more that we may

learn. Again, in assessing the capabilities and potentials of Indian students in the Speech Communication classroom, we should be aware of their traditional backgrounds and put these to use in our instructional efforts.

Innumerable accounts of early explorers, negotiators, and writers bear vivid testimony to the keen listening and amazing memory possessed by many Indian leaders and spokesmen. As Jones reminds us:

> For them there were no books of reference, no libraries, no research centers of any kind - only the tribal "rememberers." A case at hand well illustrates this type of experience. A contest between a representative of the United States Government, in council with the Indians concerned, was in progress over the content of a land treaty entered into years before. The government agent claimed that the contract read one way; while, from memory, the tribal orator declared that it read just the reverse.
>
> With agitation, the agent said, "You have forgotten. We have it written down on paper." "The paper then tells a lie," was the quick retort of the tribal spokesman. Touching his brow with complete self assurance, he continued, "I have it written down here."
>
> In due time the document which recorded the contract was brought into the council-ring. There, to the astonishment of all except the Indians, the paper confirmed the tribal orator's words.[11]

Of more immediate consequence to our classroom interaction with Speech Communication students of American Indian ancestry is the fact that, once

more in the words of Shirley Witt:

> The tradition of exact repetition persists to the present day in such a way that, for instance, a joke told in New Mexico may be heard again in Nebraska and Indiana and then in Washington, D. C., told by four different Indians, months apart, and yet the joke will be recited exactly, word for word....The tradition of exact repetition is not a function of an unimaginative people: It is a tradition born out of necessity....[12]

In terms of contrast, perhaps no more striking comparison may be made than that of the listening behavior of Jones' tribal "rememberers" and that of some of their non-Indian counterparts at treaty councils during the 19th. century. Among the most vivid of these is that reported by Vestal in his account of the Medicine Lodge Council of 1867. This is his description of the attentiveness exhibited by the government negotiators during one of the most significant Indian presentations of the entire series of meetings, that of the Comanche chief, Ten Bears:

> While the talk was being interpreted, the Honourable gentlemen were engaged in different things. Harney with head erect, watched with interest each dusky and painted face of the Indians around the tent. Sanborn picked his teeth and laughed jollily. Tappan read Indian reports about the destruction of the Indian village. Henderson, with eyeglass in his hand, seemed buried in deep study. Terry busied himself in printing alphabetical letters and Augur whittled away with energy. Agent Leavenworth examined his children....[13]

Quickly now, a final brief look at the role of silence in traditional communicative behavior exhibited by the American Indian. In the past, and to a lesser extent yet today, the derogatory label of "Silent Sitter" has been given Indian students by classroom teachers unaware of this role.

Eastman has pointed out that the Indian:

> ...believes profoundly in silence--the sign of a perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of body, mind, and spirit. The man who preserves his selfhood is ever calm and unshaken by the storms of existence--not a leaf, as it were, astir on the tree; not a ripple upon the surface of the shining pool.[14]

Emphasizing the regard of the Indian for silence in communication and commenting upon the manner in which children were instructed early in its use, the famous Lakota orator, Standing Bear, noted:

> Training began with children who were taught to sit still and enjoy it. They were taught to use their organs of smell, to look when there was apparently nothing to see, and to listen intently when all seemingly was quiet....A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation....In the midst of sorrow, sickness, and death, or misfortune of any kind, and in the presence of the notable and great, silence was the mark of respect.[15]

Contrast this with the nervous uneasiness and fidgeting which usually accompany extended periods of silence in the spoken communication of non-Indians!

In summary, this paper has dealt briefly with three specific aspects of traditional speech communication behavior among the American Indian citizens of our nation. These three...the tradition of Indian eloquence, comparatively superior listening and memory capacities, and silence as an integral part of communication...have been suggested as important areas of consideration for the Speech Communication teacher whose classroom includes Native American students. It is hoped that the comments made here will serve as a motivator for further individual investigation and action.

As a closing thought, the words of Decori, a Winnebago chief, spoken over a century-and-a-half ago, would seem to be uniquely appropriate:

> Father: The Great Spirit made the white man and the Indian. He did not make them alike....The white man does not like to live like the Indian - it is not his nature. Neither does the Indian love to live like the white man - the Great Spirit did not make him so. We do not wish to do anything contrary to the will of the Great Spirit. If he had made us with white skins and characters like the white man, then we would send our children to...school to be taught like white children.
>
> We think if the Great Spirit had wished us to be like the whites, he would have made us so. We believe he would be displeased with us to try and make ourselves different from what he thought good. I have nothing more to say. This is what we think. If we change our minds we will let you know.[16]

FOOTNOTES

*Mr. Osborn is Professor of Speech Communication at Central Washington State College. This paper was presented originally at the 1972 Western Speech Communication Association Convention.

[1]Chief Seattle, "The Indian's Night Promises to be Dark," in Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains, ed. W. C. Vanderwerth (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 121-122.

[2]George Bird Grinnell, The Punishment of the Stingy and Other Indian Stories (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), pp. vii-viii.

[3]Robert F. Spencer, "The North Alaskan Eskimo," Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 171 (1959), 383.

[4]Shirley Hill Witt, "Listen to His Many Voices: An Introduction to the Literature of the American Indian," The Way: An Anthology of American Indian Literature, ed. Shirley Hill Witt and Stan Steiner (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. xxiv.

[5]Op. cit., pp. xxiii-xxvi.

[6]N. Scott Momaday, The Way to Rainy Mountain (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), pp. 32-33.

[7]Theodore John Balgooyen, "The Public Speaking of the Typical North American Plains Indian of the Nineteenth Century," Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 1957.

[8]Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[9]Balgooyen, op. cit.

[10]Theodore John Balgooeyn, "The Plains Indian As a Public Speaker," Landmarks In Western Oratory, ed. David H. Grover (Laramie, Wyoming: University of Wyoming Graduate School and Western Speech Association, 1968), pp. 13-43.

[11]Louis T. Jones, Aboriginal American Oratory (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, 1965), pp. 17-19.

[12]Witt, op. cit., p. xxiii.

[13]Stanley Vestal, Warpath and Council Fire (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 126.

[14]Charles A. Eastman, "The Soul of the Indian," in Speaking for Ourselves, ed. Lillian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 456.

[15]Chief Standing Bear, "The Land of the Spotted Eagle," ibid.